MYSTERIES

Who Killed Thai Khac Chuyen? Not I, Said the CIA

Silence and secrecy are articles of faith and a way of life in the high-security halls of the Central Intelligence Agency. It took a murky internecine dispute with the U.S. Army to force the CIA to step forward last week to tell its side of the strange story of Thai Khac Chuyen, a supposed Vietnamese double agent killed late in June. Eight members of the U.S. Special Forces, including the Green Beret commander in Viet Nam, Colonel Robert Rheault,* are under arrest in Long Binh. A civilian lawyer for one of the Green Berets has hinted that Chuyen worked for the CIA and that it ordered his execution by the Green Berets when he was discovered to be a North Vietnamese agent as well.

Not so, says the CIA. About a year ago, the agency decided to limit its work in Viet Nam to intelligence monitoring, and handed over active spying operations to the Green Berets. In mid-June, however, as the CIA tells it, the Green Berets came to the CIA for advice on what to do with a Vietnamese —whom they did not then identify—suspected of being a double agent. The CIA claims that it said that it could do nothing to help, but strongly urged the Green Berets not to kill the man. The agency repeated the advice after learning the agent's name from the Green Berets a few days later. The CIA says that it had not heard of Chuyen before that moment.

Piqued Leak. Nonetheless, Chuyen was killed shortly thereafter. A Green Beret sergeant, Alvin Smith Jr., now one of the eight under detention, came to the CIA office in Nha Trang, explained that Chuyen had been executed, and asked for protection from "a bunch of wild men" in his outfit. The CIA agent alerted the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, which moved Smith to Saigon. General Creighton Abrams, the U.S. commander in Viet Nam, ordered a full-scale probe that led to the arrests. The Green Berets, according to the CIA, at first insisted that Chuyen had been sent on a mission and had simply not returned; later, some changed their tune. The CIA version does not explain the exact role of Colonel Rheault. One theory is that he demanded to be arrested with his subordinates, taking a commander's responsibility for what they did.

Why has the CIA broken its customary silence since the arrests? Apparently out of pique at the Army. CIA

* Rheault was relieved of his command and replaced by Colonel Alexander Lemberes, a military troubleshooter who subsequently broke a leg in a parachute jump. Last week the Army announced that Lemberes will be succeeded by Colonel Michael Healy, now a 9th Infantry Division brigade commander, who has been a Green Beret since 1954.